

IN THE SLUMS.

MISERY BY MOONLIGHT.

Bedford, alias Alaska Street—A Night Tour Through the Domain of Depravity—Some of the Denizens "Interviewed."

What has been Done and What can be Done for their Regeneration—A Christmas Dinner for the Ragamuffins.

Our City Fathers will persist in being visionary and whimsical at times. Almost everybody has heard of Bedford street, has justly conceived it to be the very quintessence of degradation, has fetched a sigh for the wretched creatures who burrow in its moral and physical filth as the rabbit burrows in the ground, has declared that it is a disgrace to the city, has gone so far as to say that something or other ought surely to be done towards rooting out the dens of vice, the hotbeds of disease, and the abodes of squalor with which it and the surrounding locality abounds. What a master-stroke it was, then, for Councils to wipe out utterly and forever the shame which its existence cast upon a great city, by changing with one grand act of legislation the name of Bedford street to Alaska!

Misery by Moonlight.

Late on Monday evening, in company with the Rev. John D. Long and Officers McCullough and Dougherty, of the Seventeenth district police, we paid a visit to the locality, about an hour being devoted to an inspection of the south side of Bedford street, between Sixth and Seventh, directly opposite the Mission House. To faithfully depict all the scenes of wretchedness witnessed during that short and contracted tour is quite impossible. A perfect picture of human depravity, as it here exists, cannot be imparted by pen and ink; there are certain lights and shades which are too fleeting to be fastened upon the canvas, there are depths of depravity of which we are not suffered to speak to ears polite.

On the "Kinchin Lay."

A little to the west of the Mission House, on the opposite side of the street, is a dilapidated frame building, which is one of the most notorious dens in the neighborhood. When Judge Peirce and the Grand Jury visited the locality recently, they found this establishment bolted and barred against them, and an opportunity to inspect it was wanting. It was therefore determined that we should make a beginning here, before the alarm had been given, and up a creaking and winding stairway opening upon a narrow alley we accordingly made our way. There was some little delay at the door of the vilest room in the whole vile structure, but an entrance was finally effected through the imperative demand of Officer McCullough. The apartment proved to be about ten feet by twelve in diameter, and its only occupants at the time were four white women. The elder of these, who was the reputed mother of two of the young girls, was reclining carelessly upon a filthy lounge, which, with a small table, a solitary chair, and a low stove, comprised the outfit of the place. This woman has the reputation of being fairly unrivaled in the vicinity of her life, but during our stay she was garrulous but respectful in her demeanor.

In the chair by the stove sat a young girl who has recently figured in our police reports. In company with a young man she was not long since taken into custody because of an assortment of boots and shoes which were found in possession of the twin. They gave the names of John and Jennie Claypole, and their examination before the magistrate proved that they are fitly so named, being life-like counterparts of the famous Noah and Charlot, who have been so offensively dished up by Dickens in "Oliver Twist." John was, like Noah before him, "on the Kinchin lay," while Jennie aspired at times to the pursuit of the "lither art."

"What are you doing here, Jennie?" inquired the officer. "Oh, I'm still on hand," she responded. "You took John down to Delaware, but none of the whipping post for me." "Suppose I am come for you now." "I guess not, I've done nothing." "Didn't you steal those boots?" "You know—steal them boots?" "Well, I won't disturb you now." "You'd better not."

Stepping at "The Continental."

Up another narrow alley a few steps distant we were then conducted, and introduced into an open space in the rear of a frame building. On one side stood a small frame shanty, about twenty seven feet in superficial area and not more than six feet high. In the previous of the three years ago we had on a previous of the same structure, which then rejoiced in the title of "The Continental," it being at the time devoted to lodging purposes. The landlord of those days was a venerable African, who kept a ferocious dog and eked out a miserable existence for himself and his canine companion by "taking in and doing for" sundry outcasts at the rate of ten cents per night, cash in advance. A tap at the door caused it to open quickly, but there was no chance, no need to cross the threshold. At the rear was a shelf on which were a few bits of crockery and a lighted candle which threw a flickering glare over the inmates. Sitting upon the floor opposite the entrance was a white woman, and by her side lay a sleeping infant. Right by the door sat upon a clay pipe. Between him and the woman was a low charcoal stove, and so closely abutted it were nudged the inmates that neither of them could have turned about without turning its glowing contents upon the floor.

"What do you pay for the use of this place?" was our first query, after the customary greeting. "Twenty cents a day," answered the lord of the castle in a tone of voice and with a manner that was entirely free from repugnance. "Do you pay your rent every day?" "Yes, it is easier to pay twenty cents a day than it is to let two or three days run together." "The owner would probably set you out if you didn't pay up promptly every day."

"No, I guess he would trust me; but I don't want to be trusted, if you can help."

"Have you no trade?" "Yes, I have a sort of a trade; but it's of no use to me except in summer time. I'm a brickmaker." "How, then, do you raise the money for your rent, if you've been doing nothing lately?" "Well, a few days ago I got some patent blacking, and to-day I sold a dozen boxes, clearing seventy-five cents on the dozen. That's not much, but it's better than doing nothing. I have been trying to get a little money together so that we could buy some furniture and move up town. I don't like this sort of a place, and want to get out of it as soon as possible."

"We hope you may succeed. Good-night." "Good-night." And we took our leave, impressed with the fact that this man at least might possibly be living below his instincts, and that he had in him the making of a sober, honest, and industrious man, if he could but succeed in getting the better of his miserable fate. But the chances are sadly against him, even if he has any true ambition to better his lot in life.

A Party by the Name of Johnson. As we turned from this house, Mr. Long pointed to the entrance to the cellar of the building standing in front of it, and said:—"Down there lives a negro by the name of Johnson. I want you to see him; he is one of the most desperate, depraved, and unscrupulous villains to be found in the whole neighborhood, and has lured more young white women to ruin than any other man on Bedford street."

A rap on the cellar door brought the "party by the name of Johnson" to the surface. "Walk down, gentlemen," he exclaimed, in a husky, rattling, spluttering, wheezy voice, "walk down, and help the ole man along a little, if you can." Down we went, but the stairway was so steep that it was almost impossible to make the descent. The "party by the name of Johnson" had preceded us, and seating himself upon a chair without a back, drew his bony hands over an uncovered stove, which stood almost in the center of the place, apparently without chimney communications, and then awaited developments. Opposite him sat another "man and brother," whose sole occupation was an effort at warming his fingers, while in the background, on the floor, lay a well preserved and one-eyed negro woman, and on a settee at the side reposed a bloated white man in an uneasy slumber. The light shed upon the scene by a solitary candle contended with the lurid flame of the coals, but together they did not suffice to illuminate the dreary apartment sufficiently to bring out all its features. Squalor and filth and woe, however, were so indelibly impressed on its occupants and their surroundings, that there was no need for more light to cause the heart of the beholder to sink within him.

Johnson, the head of the household, presented within himself a study which absorbed all our attention. He pretended to be sightless, and a single glance at his eyes was sufficient to show that there was a measure of truth in his pretensions. The paleness of his countenance was gone, and this was the cause of the peculiar husky lisp which rendered his utterance so difficult and ludicrous. One solitary snag of a tooth graced his upper jaw, and his thin lips were parted, and a garrulous tongue in motion, his countenance presented a more striking likeness to that of a chimpanzee than of a human being.

"Johnson," exclaimed Mr. Long, as soon as the party was fairly on the floor of the hole, "Johnson is one of the greatest scamps that I know of." "Now, now, now, Mithter Long," replied and wheezed the wretch to whom this disreputable character had been given; "for what point do you abute me to?" "Why, Johnson," was the rejoinder, "you know you have committed every crime forbidden in the decalogue, unless it is murder."

"Did you ever know me to commit murder, thir?" "No, I never did; but—" "Just thir, thir; he thair he never knew me to commit murder. Did you ever know me to thair?" "Steep! Why, Johnson, you know you are one of the greatest thieves that's going."

"A thair! Now on what point, Mithter Long, do you accute me of being a thair? Can you prove that I'm a thair?" Then, rising to his feet, with a show of indignation, and pushing back from his forehead the dirt-begrimed smock which had hitherto partly concealed his features, he began to gesticulate with emphasis, and ran on volubly:—"Gentlemen, he thair I'm a thair. But on what point? Thair I. Thair thir my mouth, and I pay rent here, and a man can thair thir mind in his own house when he thair called a thair. Now, on what point doth he thair I'm a thair? I go out to beg, for the ole man thair get along, ye know; and when I thair a gentleman I thair to him, 'Will you give the ole man a thair to help him along?' An' if he give the ole man a thair, 'Thank ye, an' if he don't, I thair, 'All right, thir,' and wait for the next ole man, an' if he give the ole man a thair, doth that make me a thair?"

"But that is not all, Johnson," interposed Mr. Long. "You are a notorious old liar, and nobody can believe a word that you say." "Now, gentleman," resumed the hard-pressed defendant, "the thair I'm a liar, but on what point? Thair I. Did you ever know me to commit a falsehood?" "I scarcely ever knew you to tell the truth. Besides that, you are quarrelsome, and abuse your wife. Only the other night you were arrested by Officer McCullough here for trying a rope around your wife's neck or waist and attempting to drag her up the steps of this cellar."

"Did you hear that, Mary Jane?"—turning to the woman, who had risen to a sitting posture during the preceding colloquy—"Did you hear 'im thair that I had a rope around your neck or your waist and tried to drag you up thair?" Now, Mary Jane, you're in your own house, and can thair your mind, for I pay rent here and thair is my mouth. Now, Mary Jane, tell the gentlemen, did you ever see me with a rope around your neck or your waist, tryin' to drag you up thair? Thair out, an' thair your mind."

Mary Jane, thus appealed to, grinned all over, and spluttered out:—"If I guess I didn't see you with a rope around my neck; for if I had I would have been choked to death, most like."

"You don't mean to say," we exclaimed, "that you can read French and Spanish, do you?" "If he had his eyes, he means," roared Mary Jane, from her bundle of rags on the floor. "If I had my eyes, gentlemen; certainly, I mean if I had my eyes."

"You've got a great many things in that head of yours, Johnson," we remarked, at this point. "I ain't got nothin' in my head, thir, and never had, thir." "We mean in the inside, and not on the outside." "Oh, yeth; I thee now what you mean. I never had nothin' in my head on the outside, thir; I'll give any man a dollar for everything he find in my head, thir."

"How did you lose your eyesight, Johnson?" we inquired. "By fightin', thir." "And how did you lose your palate?" "By fightin', thir." "And how did you lose your front teeth?" "By fightin', thir." "What a terrible fighter you must have been in your time! Where did you do all this fighting?" "On the Pawnee, thir, in Mobile bay. A thiplinter from the mainmast thiruk me on the forehead; here 'th the thair, thir,"—having his head for the first time, as he resumed his seat.

And then, after some further conversation in much the same vein, the "interview" with "the party by the name of Johnson" terminated and we withdrew. The "ole man" carefully closed the shutters leading into his underground den as soon as we were fairly out of it; but half an hour later we again encountered him, and Bedford street, we were briskly as if he could master Spanish in print with the same readiness as he could with his tongue.

"Just out for a little air, gentlemen," he said, in answer to our salutation; "an' to see if I couldn't pick up thair to help the ole man along, for the ole man thair get along thair, ye know."

Brief Notes of Misery. Time and space forbid that we should narrate in such detail the incidents of the whole tour through this hot-bed of depravity. In another cellar, which we soon after entered directly from the street, we found a white man and three white women, the former as blind as a bat and inclined to be judgment at the intrusion. But he was soon quieted, and then grew quite communicative, hopping about the barren floor with the assurance that he "had seen the day when he could dance a jig with any of us, and do a hard day's work with the best of us."

A Grand Inquest and its Meagre Fruits. On the evening of Saturday, November 27, Judge Peirce, accompanied by District Attorney Gibbons and the members of the Grand Jury, visited Bedford street and its vicinity, under escort of Sergeant Duffy and other policemen. It is needless to say that these officials were horrified at what they witnessed, and the result of the inspection was a formal presentation of the case to the Grand Jury by the Judge on the following Monday. From his personal observation, the Judge rightly divined that the rum traffic was in the greatest measure responsible for the misery and crime he witnessed, and in his charge to the Grand Jury urged them to do all in their power to inaugurate a reformation by attempting to break up this traffic, as far as the provisions of the law would allow.

But of what avail will it be if a conviction is had upon each and every true bill so found? The suppression of the vile and senseless traffic is the first and is as firmly grounded as before. If the population of the Alaska district could be shut in from the rest of the world, and whiskey declared contraband of war, it might be possible to improve its denizens both morally and physically. But so long as they cannot thus be effectually blocked from the assaults of the rummer, it is apparently hopeless to look to any reformation or moral elevation on this basis; and if no more feasible project can be devised, the conclusion is inevitable that the filth and wretchedness and sin of Bedford street are but the chronic sores upon our social system which, fostered by an inherent and ineradicable impurity, are absolutely incurable.

Extermination the Only Remedy. In his charge to the Grand Jury, as already quoted, Judge Peirce described the locality as "a common sewer of vice, corruption, and degradation." The simple truth of the matter is, that so long as the receptacle is permitted to exist, the filth and scum and vilest of the city will continue to flow into it. The destruction of the sink-hole is the only method whereby its contents can be effectually dispersed, and brought to the surface within reach of the civilization of the age.

In this aggregation of human depravity it is only possible to sink out a few of the floating wrecks, to send the young by transferring them to other spheres before their souls are steeped in misery and crime beyond redemption. In this good cause the Bedford Street Mission is doing a noble work; but it is so crippled by the stunted support it receives that the labor of years is scarcely perceptible when brought into contrast with the work that remains to be done. Tens of thousands of dollars are contributed to the benevolent people of the city for carrying the people into foreign lands, where paltry hundreds are devoted to the great task which awaits us at our very doors. The true heathen are here in our midst, and until a reasonable effort is made in their behalf, every dollar that goes to the South Sea Missions is a violation of the injunction that charity should begin at home. One hundred thousand dollars devoted immediately to Bedford street and its vicinity would be productive of more substantial benefit to humanity than three times as much sent abroad.

The contributors to the South Sea Missions, however, cannot be made to appreciate this fact, and hence the Bedford Street Mission limps along, doing as much good as it can with a few thousand dollars a year. The Rev. John D. Long, the missionary in charge of its labors, informs us that they are even now so hard pressed for money in carrying on their ordinary work, that they have not the means for replenishing the stock of coal, which will be exhausted in the course of the year. The mere statement of this fact should suffice to bring a generous response, and if a greater quantity of fuel is received than the direct wants of the mission require, there are hundreds of shivering wretches in the neighborhood on whom the surplus can be bestowed, and the aggregate of human suffering thereby measurably relieved.

But something more than mere missionary labor is required to wipe this blot from the face of our city. Bedford Street must be rooted up; its miserable hovels and vile dens must be torn down, and their place must be supplied by buildings that are more fit for the habitation of human creatures than for the wallowing of unclean beasts. During the past two or three years the Board of Health, with the pestilence staring them in the face, have done much towards improving the condition of the locality, and of late the Building Inspector has been a helping hand by ordering the demolition of some of the more dilapidated structures, a few of which have been succeeded by buildings which are decent without and comfortable within. Against their interference, however, the owners of the property struggle desperately. The profits reaped by these extortionists are almost incredible, and hence they resist any action on the part of the authorities which compels them to increase the amount of capital already invested, without a corresponding return. Not long since, through information furnished to the inspectors by the instrumentality of Mr. Long, a miserable shanty was ordered to be demolished. The proprietor at once called upon the missionary, and, in a great rage, demanded to know his reasons for thus tampering with the personal concerns of another.

He vented his wrath in blasphemy and abuse, and finally, in a fit of passion, laid his hand upon Mr. Long's shoulder. Within an hour he was confronting Mayor Fox, and when held to an account for his indiscretion, repaired to his haunts in a very tractable mood.

Of Mr. Long's fitness for the labor he has in hand, a visit to the mission and a tour of the neighborhood in his company, by day or night, will afford sufficient evidence. He is feared and respected by all the wretches and desperadoes into contact with whom he is daily brought. For the most part they listen patiently to advice and rebuke alike, and do not molest him in his earnest labors in their behalf. But now and then the missionary encounters a customer who proves a little refractory, and his task does not always present a monotonous freedom from personal danger, as a case in point will show.

Catching a Tar-Bar. One evening recently there strolled into Bedford street a man in sailor's garb. The jointer was more than half-seas-over. In truth, he had found himself quite out of his element, and his eye not meeting the expense of water to which it had been accustomed, he had attempted to set himself adrift in a more villainous liquid, with a flattering show of success. A crowd of bummers followed close in his wake, with an eye to a wreck and the fotsam and jetsam attendant upon the catastrophe. When the unsteady mariner reached the neighborhood of the Mission House, the attention of Mr. Long was attracted to him, and an effort determined upon to save him from his greedy and gloating followers. Two worthy young gentlemen who, zealous of good works, were devoting an evening to the reformation of the locality, contrived to drag him into the main room of the Mission; but the vile stuff which he had been imbibing had transformed him for the time into a sluggish and almost lifeless mass of flesh, and when the threshold was once passed, he fell heavily to the floor. The crowd of bummers, disappointed in their prospective plunder, gathered about the entrance, peering in with such sinister looks that it was feared they would attempt to take possession of their anticipated victim by force. So it was deemed advisable to remove the unconscious man to the yard in the rear, where he would be more difficult of access. This was with much difficulty accomplished, when, to the consternation of his assistants, a sudden and fiery impulse seized upon him, and in an instant he was transformed from a limp and unresisting burden into a ferocious brute, endowed with superhuman strength. Like a flash of lightning, his great hairy fist smote one of his benefactors in the ribs and placed him hors de combat. The other covered with fear in the corner of the enclosure, while the enraged mariner, intent apparently upon escaping from what he supposed to be the vilest of vices, made for the door through which but a moment before he had been carried unconsciously. In the doorway stood the missionary, unarmed and powerless before the brute, when he thrust under his very eyes his two clenched fists. But a steady and unflinching look saved Mr. Long for the moment from assault, and past him plunged the sailor, in full tilt for a harmless spectator who stood just in front of the pulpit. His feet, however, caught against an obstruction, and he measured his full length on the floor again, but only to turn quickly and grasp the leg of his fancied adversary, into the tender part of which he ran his teeth with all the energy wielded with ease, and the hard wood was brought down upon his skull with such force that the jelly tar reposed at length upon the floor, and his wild career was terminated by a pair of ornamental brackets.

Amidst such scenes as this does the Rev. John D. Long pursue his labor of love, never despairing and never flinching.

A Christmas Dinner for the Ragamuffins. As we stated a day or two ago, it has been the custom to give the children who are attendants upon the schools of the Mission a grand Christmas dinner, and this custom will be adhered to on Saturday next. Mr. Long and his assistants are now engaged in decorating the interior of the building in a manner appropriate to the occasion, being desirous that, for one day in the year at least, the outcasts and ragamuffins shall have cause to forget their wretched surroundings. But the Mission is unable to carry out this project without material assistance, and appeals to the benevolent people of the city for contributions of turkeys, chickens, geese, and all the other time-honored delicacies of the Christmas table. Over three hundred hungry mouths are to be filled, and one turkey will not be sufficient. Nobody, however, need be afraid that his contribution will be superfluous, for if the three hundred have enough, and there is anything to spare, there are hundreds of poverty-stricken wretches in the neighborhood who never sat down to a Christmas dinner since their miserable lives began. But even when the Christmas season is past, and the savory burdens of the Mission table have ceased to be a reality and become a mere memory, poverty and sickness will stalk hand in hand through the locality, and throughout the year contributions of fruits and vegetables will be most acceptable for distribution among their victims. This Christmas dinner that is to be presented a rare opportunity for all who have an excess of the good things of life to partake of what they retain with a better relish because of what they have given away. And what they choose to send should be sent without delay, to the care of Rev. John D. Long, No. 619 Alaska (Bedford) street.

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